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Inge Van Hulle*

Museums Also Lie

* Max Planck Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory, Frankfurt am Main, vanhulle@lhlt.mpg.de



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Inge Van Hulle

Museums Also Lie*

The question of restitution has become a hot topic both in academic circles and amongst the broader public. Although legal historians have been notably absent from these debates, for several years now historians, legal experts, sociologists and political scientists have delved into the question of whether, how and when the restitution of cultural goods by Western museums to the Global South will take place. Despite this academic attention, the debate concerning restitution suffers from historical amnesia: the overall impression reigns that the demand for restitution of cultural goods is a fairly recent one. As Bénédicte Savoy illustrates in her

latest book »Afrikas Kampf um seine Kunst. Geschichte einer postkolonialen Niederlage«, this could not be further from the truth. Through a meticulous, year-by-year reconstruction, Savoy recounts the history of missed opportunities for restitution by uncovering the deliberations and failed initiatives that took place in the period from 1965 to 1985, primarily between West German museums and African countries, with a few detours to the United Kingdom, France and Belgium. For the reconstruction of this hidden history, Savoy employs a treasure trove of untapped archival material, media coverage, films and documenta-

* BÉNÉDICTE SAVOY, *Afrikas Kampf um seine Kunst. Geschichte einer postkolonialen Niederlage*, München: C.H. Beck 2021, 256 p., ISBN 978-3-406-76696-1

ries. In doing so, Savoy employs a sociological approach and manages to reconstruct who the main actors were; which camps and alliances existed both for and against restitution; and – perhaps most importantly – which arguments they employed.

Savoy's more sociological history of restitution highlights the unrelenting force of a number of key actors that have remained under the radar in more traditional, institutional accounts. These include first and foremost the African protagonists. The book starts in 1965 when the first call for restitution was raised in an article published by Dahomeyan journalist Paulin Joachim in *Bingo*, a Francophone African journal (12). However, the first real public debates on restitution were initiated in the 1970s by African artists and filmmakers, for example, through the iconic film »You hide me« (22). African artists and states continued to use artistic expressions and exhibitions to illustrate the intimate connection between restitution and the enhancement of African cultural independence, awareness and self-confidence. This culminated – as Savoy illustrates – in the Festac '77, the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, in Nigeria, which used a replica of a famous ivory mask of Queen Idia – in possession of the British Museum (86) – as its logo. The masks were looted by the British during the ransack of the palace of the Oba of Benin in 1897 and are still today symbolic of restitution debates, particularly in the United Kingdom.

Moreover, in the diplomatic sphere, African actors proved instrumental in the creation of an institutional and legal framework for restitution. The Nigerian archaeologist Ekpo Eyo, for example, as one of the four vice-directors of ICOM (International Council of Museums) and Nigerian director of antiquities, in September 1971, aided Nigerian demands for a permanent loan of a number of cultural goods from the German Foreign Ministry (27). By the mid-1970s, restitution had reached the international stage, in large part also thanks to Mobutu Sese Seko's scathing speech before the UN General Assembly in which he scorned the pillaging of the African continent and the usurpation and destruction of its natural resources. This led to the adoption of resolution 3187, which called for the restitution of works of art to countries that were victims of appropriation. To this must also be added the humanist appeal in 1978 by the Director-General of UNESCO, Ahmadou-

Mahtar M'Bow, to »at least give back those representative treasures of art that are the most important and dear (...) and whose absence is the most difficult to bear« (103).

While pressure was mounting on Western museums to heed the call for restitution, Western museum representatives dug their heels firmly into the sand. Once again, Savoy unearths the background of the museum protagonists who opposed restitution: an older generation of West-German, mostly ex-NSDAP, white male museum directors, more often than not with a legal background (135). They had no qualms about warding off African demands using any means necessary: delay tactics, racism and paternalism, the spread of false information, or the exclusion of their pro-restitution colleagues, such as Herbert Ganslmayer, the director of the Übersee-Museum in Bremen, who remained undeterred in his resolve to aid the African cause.

When reading Savoy's book, one cannot help but experience profound feelings of exasperation, anger and vicarious shame. This is because Savoy's masterful, yet factual account brilliantly uncovers how »museums also lie« (83). One such example is a letter dated July 1976 from Friedrich Kußmaul, President of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz and director of the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart, to the Minister of Culture of Baden-Württemberg (77–79). In the letter Kußmaul told a tall and fabricated tale of how he had been approached by a Swiss art broker who had offered him a »significant« Benin mask that had in fact already been restituted to Nigeria, only to then be sold again by the Nigerian government »for a millions-worth value«. The news of the letter subsequently reached Ekpo Eyo, who set the record straight. This is just one of many, at times, shocking anecdotes.

Apart from outright lies, the arguments that museum officials put forward to deflect restitution are all too familiar, as Savoy shows. These included exaggeration of restitution demands, scare-mongering about the disappearance of Western museum collections, deflection through calls for a »concerted European« approach, politicisation of the discussion, accusations of emotionality on the part of African claimants and, of course, juridical obfuscation.

Savoy's book indeed also opens avenues for legal historians. It hints at the importance of legal professionals and of legal discourse in shaping

arguments pro and contra restitution: from conceptual obfuscation concerning »property«, »possession«, »restitution« or »return« by museum directors to the debate around the naming of a UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee, which had to be changed from the »Intergovernmental Committee Concerning Restitution or Return of Cultural Property« to the less contentious »Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Re-

turn of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin or its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation« (ICPRCP). This book is a must-read for anyone interested in restitution debates, and certainly for those legal historians among them. The first comprehensive legal history of African-European restitution debates remains to be written. ■